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Changing Seasons

Hunting seasons, that is

Editor's note: This is an excerpt of an article relaying important changes related to hunt recommendations. This excerpt focuses solely on deer, while the complete article also encompasses elk, buffalo, fall javelina, fall turkey and tree squirrel. To read about these species, please visit www.azgfd.gov/magazine.

No one likes change. It is disruptive, different and scary. Psychologists define stress as a person's physical and psychological response to change. So there you have it: Change = Stress.

But without change, things never get better. Hunter participation has been decreasing for decades, and wildlife conservation needs hunters. Hunters are not only important because they generate funding and volunteers to work on wildlife conservation projects, but because they provide political support for important legislative issues. They also remind others that wildlife is significant and that it positively affects one's quality of life. Watching hunter participation wane provides inspiration for change.

In game management, we remain responsive to what is happening on the ground, yet we must think ahead to fulfill our duty as stewards of wildlife populations. "Managing Today for Wildlife Tomorrow" is more than a catchy slogan plastered on our trucks. The North American Model of Wildlife Conservation was built as a system by which hunters' dollars are used to fund research, protect wildlife and habitat and help us plan future management based on what we've learned from past research and experience. The model remains relevant today because people value wildlife. No one else has agreed to pay the tab covered by hunters, anglers and recreational shooters since the model's inception.

It is simple. To make this system of conservation thrive, we need more hunters. To get more hunters, we need more chances for people to hunt.

The Arizona Game and Fish Department convened a team of wildlife managers, field supervisors and game specialists in March 2007 to look for ways to increase Arizonans' chances for hunting without negatively impacting wildlife populations. In June 2007, the team shared its findings at 11 public meetings statewide and on the department's

Web site. Public comments were encouraged and accepted by fax, e-mail and mail. The Arizona Game and Fish Commission acted on these findings, specifically our recommended hunt guidelines, during its August 2007 meeting.

These new hunt guidelines allow more people to go hunting, but because of the innovative ideas generated by the team, these structures often reduced the number of people afield at the same time. When it comes to preserving our hunting heritage and maintaining the most successful system of wildlife conservation in the world, the more hunter-conservationists we have participating, the brighter the future looks for wildlife.

We are going to highlight the significant changes adopted by the Commission in relation to deer seasons, and share the rationale the department used in making these recommendations. The Commission also considered and adopted changes to elk, buffalo, fall javelina, fall turkey and tree squirrel seasons, but due to space constraints, these species are not covered in this article. The complete article can be found online at www.azgfd.gov/magazine.

Deer Changes

Over the past two decades, deer populations generally have declined in numbers. Weather has not been favorable, as we've seen predominately dry winters and intervening summers of spotty rainfall. These dry conditions were not conducive to favorable habitat conditions. While deer populations declined, rural Arizona was changing as well. The public became increasingly excluded from more places as development continued to limit access. Restricted access was fueled by landowners' fear of vandalism, littering and lack of respect for private property. As access to public lands became restricted, the gateways that remained open became more crowded. The cycle continued with other landowners restricting access, and soon our hunts became more

crowded even though we had fewer hunters in the field than we did two decades ago. As some deer populations increase we may have no place to put more hunters.

When it came to revising deer seasons, we started with a blank calendar and built a structure that achieved our goals. We wanted to increase the number of people who can go hunting this fall and make it more enjoyable for those who are lucky enough to get drawn. Here are the results.

We created a series of seven-day deer hunts without overlapping season dates. This means the only deer hunters afield with you are those with the same tag that you have — there will not be hordes of whitetail hunters competing for space during your mule deer hunt and vice versa. Data showed that hunters took to the field an average of two to five days regardless of season length. In the past, a 10-day season allowed you to hunt a second weekend, but that second weekend (or your opening day) overlapped with another season. Hunters also have been complaining about juniors-only hunts coinciding with other hunts. This new season structure gives juniors their own season so parents can concentrate on their children's experiences.

In southeastern Arizona, an additional early whitetail hunt was added to spread permits temporally and reduce hunter density. Now there are three early hunts plus a late-December hunt during the rut. The permits from last year's two early hunts

were distributed among three early hunts this year, reducing the number of hunters afield at one time. In units that can support more buck harvest, we are able to let more people go hunting and still have fewer hunters afield during the hunts. This change was not implemented in central Arizona to avoid elk season conflicts; plus, hunter crowding is less of an issue in that part of the state.

The new structure creates more weekends of hunts. Will more hunting days negatively affect deer populations? Think about this: With fewer people afield at one time, hunters may not feel as compelled to hunt the backcountry. A deer trying to hide on opening day may be better off with fewer hunters around for more weekends. Research has failed to demonstrate any decrease in deer population productivity due to increased disturbance.

Doing Away With Quality?

December white-tailed deer hunts are highly sought after because hunter densities are low and whitetails are more active during the breeding season. This combination yields the lucky tag holder an improved chance to selectively harvest older age-class animals. Why would the department change these seasons?

December white-tailed deer hunts were introduced during the 1980s when all deer were more abundant than they are now. We also had more tags than applicants.

With the introduction of the late hunts, hunters could draw two tags and harvest two deer annually, if the second tag was a permit leftover from the draw. These late whitetail permits were regularly undersubscribed and available until their popularity developed. Even today, these December hunts enjoy high success with about half the hunters harvesting a buck. In comparison, only about one-fourth of



hunters in earlier hunts harvest deer. So 50 hunters in December harvest the same number of deer as 100 hunters do in October or November. By adjusting permits into earlier time frames, we can afford more hunters with a chance to go hunting.

Why is this important? In the 2007 fall draw, 72,651 people applied for a deer tag and only 42,585 people received one. So 30,066 (41 percent) of people who wanted to hunt deer had to stay home and find something else to do with their families. To accommodate more hunters, permits were shifted from December hunts into early hunts. The difference in hunt success allowed us to let more people go hunting in the early seasons than would have been able to otherwise. Although a few hunts offer 100 percent chance of being drawn if you select these as your first choice on your application, there's no getting around the fact that tens of thousands of Arizona deer hunters have to sit home each year.

Is the department going to manage for quantity and abandon quality deer hunts? No. We retained units in each region that are managed as alternative white-tailed or mule deer units. These populations are managed for an older age structure, higher hunt success and, in white-tailed deer units, enough December tags so that about 30 percent of the harvest in those units will be from that time frame. In those units, the number of December white-tailed deer tags has increased.

It's not a quality vs. quantity deer

management issue. It is an issue of providing a range of experiences Arizona hunters want. Let's look at it this way; the department has many customers with many different demands. In the simplest terms, some customers are interested in fishing and some want to observe rare birds. But on closer scrutiny, some anglers prefer coldwater fishing, or perhaps a specific type of trout with specific tackle. Although we often lump all hunters in one user group, it is important to recognize they, too, have a variety of wants.

We can provide seasons for those hunters who just wish to go afield, while providing more conservative hunts in other areas for those who want to pursue a world-class animal. We can't meet every hunter's expectation in every unit, but we can provide enough diversity so that a hunter can select the hunt that meets his or her specific desire.

What About Archery?

Archery hunts are longer than most rifle hunts and the season timing is more advantageous. Yet, rifle hunters have higher hunt success because of the advantages of their equipment. But every time we need to reduce harvest, general season hunters end up with fewer permits and archers still have unlimited opportunity. Is this fair? How can we determine what is fair?

Years ago, we adopted a formula for elk that attempts to allocate permits among the different weapon-types so that harvest is consistent with demand for those types of hunting. To estimate expected demand and harvest, the formula uses five-year averages of first-choice applicants and five-year averages for hunt success. With those two data points, you can allocate permits fairly.

The number of first-choice applicants is 90,747 for general, muzzleloader or juniors-only deer hunts. The department sells an average of 23,073 over-the-counter archery deer tags a year. This yields a 20.3 percent demand for archery, which when coupled with average hunt success, helps us determine what slice of the pie is fair for archers. Yet this is not entirely clean because 53 percent of those who buy archery tags also

apply for draw hunts. So if we look at the liberal end, 20 percent of the take is fair; or if we want to be conservative, 10 percent is fair.

Now let's examine harvest. Archers are required to phone in their harvest, yet non-compliance is a persistent issue. So, we estimate harvest using a voluntary survey card that is mailed to hunters. Questionnaires are a consistent way to obtain precise estimates with similar bias.

Archery seasons can occur in one or more of three time frames: August–September, December or January. In those units where archery harvest exceeded 20 percent of the total take, the department recommended reduction of the archery harvest. In units where archery seasons included more than a single time frame, season length could be reduced (for example, eliminate the December season). However, in those units where seasons had already been reduced to a single time frame (game management unit 12A, August–September), further season length reductions seemed imprudent. The only other alternative was to limit entry through the draw.

In those units where archery deer harvest comprised less than 10 percent of the overall harvest in the unit, the department recommended increasing season length. Several units actually received longer archery seasons.

Archers now have the option of buying an over-the-counter tag and hunting in any open unit or applying for permits in specific units through the draw. If they apply through the draw, they may mix general, muzzleloader and archery choices on their application. If drawn, they may use their draw tag. They also may participate in any open over-the-counter season if they



purchased an over-the-counter tag in addition to the draw tag. Pay attention: You cannot use an over-the-counter tag in an archery draw unit and you cannot harvest more than one deer in a calendar year.

The Upshot

The implemented changes are put in place to make hunting easier and more accessible than it has ever been before. If we didn't get it right, we are always glad to hear how we can improve it.

Change can be good, but it requires adjustment and evaluation. After monitoring these changes for a couple years, we will decide what works and what doesn't. As we have done since the beginning of the wildlife management profession, we will discard what doesn't work and retain and improve upon what does. Through it all, public input is a vital part of the process because the Arizona Game and Fish Department manages wildlife for all Arizonans, and the perpetuation of hunting is a cornerstone to our collective success. Together, our goal should be to do what is right for the resource and for the preservation and promotion of this highly successful system of wildlife conservation in which we participate. 🦌

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